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ABSTRACT

Teacher attitudes toward the high school proficiency test were identified through a 15-question survey distributed to 39 secondary school teachers representing various demographic school populations. The subjects were selected from five graduate education classes and a small city high school. The median number of years of teaching experience was 12.51 years. Results of the study show that educators believe that students should achieve a minimal competency before graduation, but are unsure if a standardized test is the best way to assess this knowledge. The data on increased time demands and paperwork are consistent with past research. The study reveals surprisingly mixed feelings about the proficiency test among educators in northwest Ohio. The negative attitudes expressed need to be brought to the attention of state legislators to gain a perspective that challenges the notion that proficiency will be a cure-all for today's educational problems. The survey questionnaire is included. (Contains 9 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Ninth Grade Proficiency, Is It the Best Measure of Learning:

A Survey of Teacher Attitudes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify teacher attitudes toward the ninth grade proficiency test. A 15 question survey was distributed to 39 secondary teachers representing various demographic school populations. The subjects were selected from five graduate education classes and a small city high school. The median years of teaching experience was 12.51. The results of the study show educators believe students should achieve minimal competency before graduation, but are unsure if a standardized test is the best way to assess this knowledge. The data on increase time demands and paperwork is consistent with past research. Surprisingly, the study has shown definite mixed-feelings about the proficiency test among educators in Northwest Ohio. The negative attitudes expressed need to be brought to the attention of state legislators to gain a different perspective that challenges the notion the proficiency will be a "cure-all" for today's educational problems.

Ninth Grade Proficiency, Is It the Best Measure of Learning: A Survey of Teacher Attitudes

Educational reform is a topic continuously under scrutiny by the media. Today's students are unable to compete with their foreign counterparts. How do we assess achievement globally? Comparisons between countries are predicated on standardized achievement test scores.

Testing is not new to the educational arena. The Army Alpha/Beta tests given in the 1930's established a foundation for the standardized testing movement in education. As many educational reforms emphasis on testing is cyclic. In the 1960's, educational testing once again was in the forefront as the National Defense Education Act was amended. Most recently, back to the basics movement and national educational goals of the 1980's have made accountability by testing a major focus of current educational reform (Haney & Madaus, 1989).

Several states require passage of a minimal competency test to receive a high school diploma. This type of educational reform has produced mixed feeling among educators, educational reformers, and the general public. According to a recent Gallop Poll, 77% of Americans surveyed supported a National Test of Competency (Jaeger, 1991).

From an educational view, are minimal competency tests the best way to assess student knowledge? Corbett & Wilson (1991) claim competency tests are easy to legislate and explain, but they question whether controlling education by testing will facilitate positive educational reform. Lazarus (1981) agrees testing will not solve the problems that face today's educational system. Most importantly, professional teachers in the field need to be given the opportunity to express their views on what the best assessment techniques are for determining student achievement.

Review of related literature

The rationale behind state competency testing programs reflect three goals most state legislative reformers believe will result from competency testing programs. The three goals are as follows: all students will need certain basic skills to be productive citizens, students must possess a body of certain knowledge and skills, and mastery of specific skills are necessary to function in the work place. Legislative reformers believe society will benefit from withholding diplomas from those students failing the state's minimal competency test (Jaeger, 1991).

Contrary to what legislative reformers believe, society is burdened

by individuals not obtaining a high school diploma. Citizens without a high school diploma have a greater chance of being on public assistance, in trouble with the law, and unable to hold a steady job (Darling-Hammond, 1991; Jaeger, 1991). Denying a high school diploma based on a test score may increase societal costs in the future.

Societal benefits in the work place are not effected by minimal competency test scores. Berlin & Sum found a gain of one grade equivalent on a test of basic skills showed minimal effect on the difference in income of high school graduates and those that did not graduate from high school (cited in Jaeger, 1991). Similarly, Eckland's (1980) longitudinal study of the class of 1972 concluded performance on a test of basic skills does not correlate with post high school employment rates or income level. Therefore, it appears legislators' goals of competency testing in relation to future employers and societal benefits are truly questionable.

Another controversy rages over the actual test as an accurate measure. Many researchers have tried to establish validity within these tests. The problem that occurs centers on what skills and knowledge high school graduates should acquire. This is defined differently between school districts, states, cultures, and potential employers. As a

result, several of the state competency tests lack evidence of validity (Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 1991; Jaeger, 1991).

Along with lack of validity evidence, arbitrary cut-off scores must be set. Since students are diverse the test is not interpreted the same way by everyone. Experts argue arbitrary cut-off scores are biased (Bardon & Robinette, 1980; Lazarus, 1981). Some students are denied a diploma based on the selection of the cut-off score.

Another facet being affected by state competency tests is the curriculum. Many states and school districts are formulating their curriculum based upon material covered on the competency tests.(Lazarus, 1981; Corbett & Wilson, 1991). This strategy is narrowing the scope of the curriculum offered. The quality of education is being sacrificed. Many higher order thinking and problem solving skills are not being taught (Haney & Madaus, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1991; Stake, 1991).

All of these concerns are influencing the empowerment of teachers as professionals. Studies identifying teachers' attitudes toward high stakes minimal competency testing programs are limited. Teachers and reformers do not agree on the issues of teaching and learning (Stake, 1991). In contrast, Corbett & Wilson (1991) did find teachers

agree with reformers that educational change is necessary. In general, teachers also agree some students are motivated by state competency test standards; and basic skills on average have shown consistent improvement (Bardon & Robinette, 1980; O'Sullivan, 1989; Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Jaeger, 1991). Unfortunately, the negative comments generated by teachers out number the positive ones.

Many of the negative comments focus on how the test is used or misused. Teachers question the validity of the tests, accuracy of information provided on student learning, and discrimination and bias generated by test questions (Haney & Madaus, 1989; Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Stake, 1991). Teachers also indicated a deterioration of teaching due to the test, a decrease in professional judgment, increase in time demands and paperwork, as well as a potential for lawsuits (Haney & Madaus, 1989; Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Stake, 1991). Obviously, competency testing has produced anxiety and stress among educators.

In regards to anxiety and stress, O'Sullivan (1989) asked teachers to rate how they thought students perceived the competency tests. Teachers identified low self-esteem and labeling of students as negative effects. It also found test result information given to students did not identify specific areas of additional study.

Summary

The literature suggests state competency test programs may have good intentions, but are associated with a variety of negative aspects. Although legislators believe society will benefit from minimal competency tests, researchers have provided evidence of negative effects on society by denying high school diplomas. Higher order thinking skills, teacher empowerment, and a varied curriculum are being forfeited as high stakes tests dictate learning outcomes. While the evidence of teacher and student attitudes is limited, it does support a consistently negative attitude toward employment of competency tests as a vehicle for educational reform. It then becomes necessary to identify attitudes of teachers in states utilizing statewide competency testing. Therefore, what are the attitudes of secondary teachers in Northwest Ohio toward the effectiveness of the ninth grade proficiency as a measure of student knowledge necessary to receive a high school diploma?

Method

Subjects

Thirty-nine secondary teachers from various Northwest Ohio high schools voluntarily completed a fifteen question survey on teacher attitudes toward the ninth grade proficiency test. Due to time constraints,

subjects were selected in two ways. A small city high school in Northwest Ohio agreed to distribute the survey to math, English, and social studies teachers (N=20). The response rate was 50% or 10 surveys completed. The remaining 29 subjects were secondary teachers selected from graduate education classes at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. Bowling Green State University draws a graduate population from rural, small city, suburban, and urban areas within a 50 mile radius from the main campus. The majority of the subjects were Caucasian with an average of 12.51 years of teaching experience. Demographically the survey responses represent the various subgroups as follows; 10 rural, 15 small city, 7 suburban, and 7 urban.

Instrument

Since limited research has been done on teacher attitudes toward state proficiency testing; I developed a 15 question survey, using a Likert scale, to elicit negative or positive responses about the ninth grade competency test. Once the survey was developed a panel of my colleagues reviewed the survey to make sure the questions were indeed representing attitudes teachers have toward the ninth grade proficiency. Modifications in regards to wording of questions were then made to the

questionnaire. A copy of the survey is appended to this paper. Internal consistency for the questionnaire was tested by using the Kuder-Richardson 21 formula. The estimated reliability for the 15 question survey (N=39) was .73.

Procedures

A small city Northwest Ohio high school (approximately 800 students) was selected to fill out the questionnaires. The principal reviewed the surveys and rationale for the study. It was agreed to place the surveys in the math, social studies, and English teachers mailboxes (N=20). Additional subjects were obtained by distributing the surveys to secondary teachers in five graduate education courses at Bowling Green State University. The secondary teachers all taught a content area covered on the ninth grade proficiency exam. The average response time for filling out the questionnaire was four minutes.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and percentage of responses to the teacher attitude questionnaire. The results of a one-way analysis of variance indicated there was no significant difference in teacher responses based upon demographic information. Teachers agreed (92%, X=4.18, SD=.90) high school students should achieve a

minimal level of competency before graduation. The use of standardized tests to measure student knowledge produced a mixed reaction (44% agreed and 43% disagreed). Alternative assessments in addition to state competency score was favored by 80% of the teachers (X=3.87, SD=1.30). Student grades and attitudes toward school are not being positively affected by the institution of a competency testing program (X=2.13, SD= .99).

Insert Table 1 here

Discussion

The results from this study indicated teachers agreed minimal competency is necessary, but question whether a state competency test should be used solely as a determinate to receive a high school diploma. Time demands and paperwork increases due to the ninth grade proficiency test expressed by this study are supported by other authors (Haney & Madaus, 1989; Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Stake, 1991). Teachers responded negatively toward the concept of being accountable for student achievement on the proficiency, but in contrast also responded negatively toward the idea state legislators are questioning

the abilities of teachers. If teachers were doing their jobs and students were learning, then why would a minimal competency test be needed? The material on the test should have been taught according to the state, and teachers are responsible for students receiving those pockets of knowledge. Therefore, the implication of reform by testing is necessary due to a lack of confidence in the educational system, ie. teachers.

The study suggested teachers do not see the attitudes or grades of students to be improving as a result of the state competency testing program. It would be interesting to conduct a study of student attitudes about the proficiency exam to identify if students views towards school and grades correlate with the findings in this study. Hence, the legislative implication of minimal competency testing as a viable agent improving educational outcomes indeed is questioned by educators responding to this study.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. The sampling procedure was biased. Time and economic constraints placed on this study did not allow for a stratified random sample of all high school teachers in Northwest Ohio. The subjects selected from the university setting may have different attitudes than those teachers not furthering their education. The number of subjects selected is small, but does

represent four different school populations. Nevertheless, the data does depict a negative attitude toward several dimensions of the state competency testing program. Ultimately state legislators should consult and review feed back from the experts, educators in the field, before advocating the positive effects testing will have in improving education.

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Teacher Perspective on the Ninth Grade Proficiency

Table 1

Teacher Responses to 15 questions (N=39)	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	NA (0)	Mean	SD
1. All high school students should achieve a minimum level of competency before graduation.	36%	56%	3%	0%	5%	0%	4.18	.90
2. A standardized test of minimum skills is an effective way to measure students' knowledge.	8%	36%	13%	28%	15%	0%	2.92	1.25
3. Teachers should be held accountable for the achievement of their students on the 9th grade proficiency test.	3%	13%	13%	31%	41%	0%	2.05	1.13
4. The 9th grade proficiency test questions measure skills that are taught in my school district.	8%	44%	23%	21%	3%	3%	3.26	1.10
5. Intervention for students not passing should be mandatory.	28%	49%	10%	8%	5%	0%	3.87	1.07
6. I can use the results from the 9th grade proficiency to modify my teaching strategies.	10%	23%	18%	28%	15%	5%	2.69	1.38
7. The focus of my teaching has shifted more toward material that is covered on the 9th grade proficiency.	10%	33%	5%	33%	8%	10%	2.74	1.50
8. Students that are failing the 9th grade proficiency already have negative attitudes about school.	10%	36%	13%	28%	10%	3%	3.00	1.30
9. Students' grades are improving in the classroom as a result of the 9th grade proficiency.	0%	10%	23%	38%	26%	3%	2.13	.99
10. Students are taking school more seriously.	0%	18%	18%	44%	18%	3%	2.31	1.04
11. The administration of the 9th grade proficiency causes a loss of instructional time for all students.	23%	36%	8%	21%	10%	3%	3.33	1.42
12. Along with the 9th grade proficiency, other forms of assessment should be considered before denying the student a high school diploma.	36%	44%	5%	5%	8%	3%	3.87	1.30
13. The state is questioning the abilities of the teachers by instituting a minimum competency test.	5%	21%	28%	36%	8%	3%	2.72	1.11
14. Paperwork has increase since the proficiency has been instituted.	28%	44%	13%	8%	0%	8%	3.69	1.36
15. The 9th grade proficiency is a positive step toward educational reform.	0%	33%	23%	23%	18%	3%	2.67	1.18

Average years of experience= 12.51 SD=7.9 **Average estimate of juniors not passing= 13% SD=.15 N=27**

Teacher Perspective on the Ninth Grade Proficiency

Please answer the general information questions

What grade level(s) do you teach?

How many years of teaching experience do you have?

Circle the word that best describes the type of school system you work in.

rural small city suburban urban .

Are you familiar with the questions on the ninth grade proficiency? yes no

Approximately what percentage of juniors in your school district have **Not passed** all four parts of the proficiency?

Read the following statements and circle the response that best matches what you think. SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree, NA=Not Applicable

1. All high school students should achieve a minimum level of competency before graduation.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
2. A standardized test of minimum skills is an effective way to measure students' knowledge.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
3. Teachers should be held accountable for the achievement of their students on the 9th grade proficiency test.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
4. The 9th grade proficiency test questions measure skills that are taught in my school district.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
5. Intervention for students not passing should be mandatory.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
6. I can use the results from the 9th grade proficiency to modify my teaching strategies.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
7. The focus of my teaching has shifted more toward material that is covered on the 9th grade proficiency.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA

8. Students that are failing the 9th grade proficiency already have negative attitudes about school.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
9. Students' grades are improving in the classroom as a result of the 9th grade proficiency.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
10. Students are taking school more seriously.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
11. The administration of the 9th grade proficiency causes a loss of instructional time for all students.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
12. Along with the 9th grade proficiency, other forms of assessment should be considered before denying the student a high school diploma.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
13. The state is questioning the abilities of the teachers by instituting a minimum competency test.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
14. Paperwork has increase since the proficiency has been instituted.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
15. The 9th grade proficiency is a positive step toward educational reform.	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA